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# Review of The Armed Forces Legend in Austria: The Image of the Armed Forces in the Mirror of the Austrian Press After 1945

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*Die Wehrmachtslegende in Österreich. Das Bild der Wehrmacht im Spiegel der österreichischen Presse nach 1945.* By Alexander Pollak. Vienna, Cologne, and Weimar: Böhlau Verlag. 2002. Pp. 189. €19.90. ISBN 3-205-77021-8.

The controversial *Wehrmachtsausstellung* exhibited in several German cities during the later 1990s and early twenty-first century met with no less contested a reception in Austrian venues. Alexander Pollak's survey of Austrian print media treatment of the long-standing myth of the Wehrmacht as an honorable and unsullied institution was prompted by reactions to this exhibition. Although Pollak limits his study specifically to print media, he notes that the problematic relationship to contested understandings of Austrian identity and the Nazi past are far broader and more complex. If war does, indeed, represent a continuation of politics by other means, then the participation of Austrians in the Third Reich's armed forces would, at a minimum, have implicated them as indirectly coresponsible for the regime's annihilatory policies; at worst, they would have been coperpetrators in atrocities.

Pollak addresses his subject chronologically, examining the treatment of key themes in specific contexts and tracing their persistence under evolving circumstances. No greater thematic continuity has existed over the last nearly sixty years than in the media's discussion of "ordinary soldiers" vs. "fanatical Nazis," and an obsession with Austrian victimization. This held true regardless of region and party affiliation of publications—including those within social democratic and even communist circles. During the initial postwar years, newspapers distinguished between Austrian *Soldatentum*, which was largely exonerated as antifascist, and German troops who were characterized wholesale as "Prussians" and "Nazis," as brutal automatons rather than human beings. In other cases, editorials and reportage described excesses and atrocities in vague terms, referring to actions of "executioners in uniform" or "units of the Wehrmacht" without identifying perpetrators. Such whitewashing supported calls for the return of Soviet-held Austrian POWs, who allegedly never had anything to do with "Hitlerism," from the summer of 1945 into 1955.

The persistence of four-power occupation and the onset of the cold war marked a shift in rhetoric. Pollak notes that frustration with occupation frequently expressed itself in journalistic attempts to justify National Socialism's initial success in Austria as understandable, given the prevailing economic, political, and social conditions in 1938; however, while many Austrians accepted the Nazi regime—willingly or through coercion—the common perspective voiced in the press maintained that, in the end, most were deceived by the rhetoric of solidarity and economic recovery. In short, if Austrians were never really Nazis, the occupation—referred to (un)equivocally only a few years earlier as *liberation*—was entirely unnecessary. On the other hand, Austrian soldiers were

frequently depicted as resigned to their fate, which for many meant falling as victims to a willingness to fulfill their duty. This inherent tension between Austrians as victims of Nazi and German policies, which manifested themselves in aggressive war and genocide (blame was attributed to Hitler and the general staff), and the honorable fulfillment of one's soldierly obligations in the service of a criminal regime would reemerge decades later during the Waldheim controversy. The conundrum of Stalingrad, as depicted in the press, lay in the commemoration of sacrifice with a blind eye to this contradiction.

Perhaps the most significant shift Pollak identifies occurred at the conclusion of the State Treaty and end of four-power occupation in 1955. Thereafter, the Austrian media demonstrated rather little concern for how outsiders might react to discussion of the recent past. Moreover, the growth of *Kameradschaftsverbände* in the late 1950s and the emergence of the *Neue Kronen-Zeitung* as a mass-circulation daily with a distinctly conservative, German nationalist bent, created new opportunities for representing revisionist perspectives on the Third Reich and the Wehrmacht's wartime role. Controversial developments over subsequent decades (e.g., the Wiesenthal-Peter and Frischenschlager-Reder controversies, or Haider's emergence as Freedom Party leader) provided fresh impetus for debate, with lively print media exchanges between revisionists and advocates of an unadorned *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.

Readers will appreciate the close content analysis of leading Austrian newspapers provided in this volume. Nonetheless, Pollak falls short of his stated goal of demonstrating that the press served as "gatekeeper" of information, as a "central linchpin of an 'imagined community,'" and as "a social power broker with a thoroughly autonomous role in the production and dissemination of specific content and social (power) structures" (p. 16). Without supporting evidence—e.g., letters from readers in newspaper opinion sections and opinion poll data, to name just two possibilities—Pollak fails to substantiate his suggestive claims about the power of the press. This criticism notwithstanding, the book is a thoughtful guide to print media discourses on Austria's problematic relationship to its Nazi past.

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*Der Holocaust und die westdeutschen Historiker. Erforschung und Erinnerung.* By Nicolas Berg. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag. 2003. Pp. 768. €46.00. ISBN 3-89244-610-5.

Nicolas Berg has written an important study in the tradition of the hermeneutics of suspicion. The premise of his research is as follows. Ever since the end of the Second World War, the Holocaust has been present in the minds of West